

# NI SA MOCE/SALAAM FIJI

(for my father, Hari K)

VIJAY MISHRA

There is a special horror about a 7 a.m. phone call. In Perth, where the winters can be so unexpectedly cruel, the early-morning phone call scratches at the mind, rough as rice-husks on the palms of one's hands. For twenty-five years I'd dreaded that phone call, though often it had come relating the obvious or the inevitable – like the fact that Zimbo III had died after swallowing rat-poison. My father had an immense faith in continuity: all his dogs, no matter how unlike the fierce part-Alsatian original Zimbo I, carried the same name. Perhaps it was that faith in continuity and permanence that made me feel that the 7 a.m. phone call from Fiji could be about anybody – our dog, the family milkman or the priest – but not my father himself. On 22 June the phone rang at precisely seven in the morning. Just one word from my sister's lips pronounced the inevitable. 'Buka . . .' she cried, and I knew that the end had come. Like a scene from Bombay cinema, the lamp in the room set aside for prayers had quivered and gone out. For a fleeting second I relapsed into the memories from which I had been so rudely excluded ever since my trying journey on a TEAL Electra from Fiji to Auckland in 1964.

I was eighteen when I left Fiji, my father barely forty-six. We wrote to each other for the next twenty-five years and dreamt of the day when, at leisure, we'd finally talk to one another over a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label. But time, and my father, cheated me out of that possibility. My father never confessed that deep inside, after years of careless medication for something as simple as gout, he had been in agony for the past two years.

## *Take One: The Primal Ritual*

*Anena havisha moksham vindeh* – 'May you find salvation through this oblation' – the priest intoned in somewhat pedantic Sanskrit. There are so many precise rituals to be performed, each one to be done in a manner unchanged for over two thousand years. Even in remote Fiji, a displaced Indian migrant community clung onto traditions that the

community brought with it from the India of the late nineteenth century. Sandwiched largely between the two major cities of Meerut and Patna, this India had effectively been frozen in time. And, over a century later, the highly cadenced intonations of a dead language, in death, seemed to offer spiritual release and moral support even to a community so violently wrenched out of its sources of social strength.

The priest, in a way, symbolised the two great moments of togetherness for the Hindu: marriage and death. And in so many ways the rites seemed to reflect one another. The movement of the fingers, the thumb touching the tip of the appropriate finger, the swish of water from mango leaves and the ring made out of *dub* grass reflected earlier images of rituals performed under different, happier circumstances.

My father's body was brought home from the mortuary at exactly eleven on Saturday morning. My mother had decided to put him into the brown terylene/wool suit he'd purchased in 1961. Still smelling of mothballs, this suit had been my father's pride and joy, especially since the colour and the synthetic and wool mix were all part of the fashion of the early '60s. Our carport was at the back of the house and it had been customary for us to use the back entrance. This morning, however, convention demanded that my father's body should enter the house from the front.

Our home in Dilkusha is on the first of many hills that break away from the river flats in an undulating series towards Davuilevu and beyond. There is a red concrete path that connects Hancock Road to the house itself. This path leads one through my mother's garden to the front porch and entrance of the house. Here the imperial coconut fronds mingle with the majestically beautiful Pride of India and the *Psidium guajava*, the Indian guava, which plays host to the purple granadilla vine. Besides the path, rows of orchids on erect *balabala* tree ferns jostle with the reds, golds and yellows of poinsettias, marigolds, frangipanis and cannas, and exude the haughtiness characteristic of lush tropical flowers in the cooler month of June. My father's body was taken up this path with my brother leading the way. The front door of the house opens directly into our lounge and it was here that the coffin was placed with the head facing the East, as directed by the priest. In the presence of my mother, my sister, my brother and a host of relatives and friends, the priest conducted the first of a series of rites which mark the beginning of the final journey. *Na jayate mriyate va kadacin* ('He is never born, nor does he die . . .'), consoled the pundir, glancing occasionally at the anomalous prints of Picasso's 'The Guitar Player', Breughel the Elder's 'Hunters in the Snow' and the Beatles taken from the Beatles' White Album, remnants of earlier, fleeting visits home during my university days. On the bookshelf was the old Philips four-valve radio and a National Gramophone, beside which lay a copy of 'Revolver' and Eugene Ormandy's 'Dances for Orchestra', a

gift from a sentimental friend from Timaru. The framed prints, the records, the books seemed to have defied time: they clung onto the aquamarine and white walls and shelves, unchanged after all these years.

My father had died on a Thursday, and the auspicious moment for his cremation was the following day, when the constellation of stars was favourable. But because I couldn't reach Fiji from Perth before Friday night, the cremation was held on Saturday, a day curiously at odds with my father's own astrological chart. Indeed, such was the conjunction of forces that before the body left home a further ceremony was performed to appease the five spirits (or five senses, or five devas and so on). Five earthen cups were placed around the coffin, and the priest carefully directed my brother and myself as we performed the necessary rituals. These had to be done with utmost precision; nothing at all could be remiss. The earthen cups, with camphor still burning in them, were then broken into pieces with a stone and poured onto the burning pyre hours later. This important ritual being done, members of the family and close friends poured water into my father's mouth and touched his feet. My brother and I did this twice, each time pouring water from the Ganges – a gift from Reverend Deoki, an old family friend – which had been kept in our home in a sealed jar for over twenty years.

### *Take Two: The Ritual of Fire*

*Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor ma amṛtam gamaya* – 'From darkness lead me to light, from death to immortality' – those tender words from one of the great texts of mankind, the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, once again reminded us of our cultural traditions as the coffin was raised to leave the house. This was the house my father had built precisely thirty years before – and what excitement there had been then! A cane-cutter's son, a primary-school teacher, had done the impossible: built a brick and Lysaght iron house without taking a loan. He had felt like an epic hero, like a Rama of his beloved *Ramayana* of *Tulsidas*, which he had inherited from his Brahmin father and learnt by heart. The memory of that past rejoicing was not lost on us, or on my mother; in that moment of mourning, as the coffin was lifted by my cousins and my brother, I clung to my mother and sister in a final act of mutual grief. And, as the procession moved down the steep slope towards the waiting hearse, being put down every ten steps with the chant *rama nama satya hai* ('Rama's name is the only truth'), memories came flooding back of another procession, my sister's departure upon her marriage years before down the same path. The tears that flowed were in response to the uncanny logic of the two moments, so very identical in their effects, and yet so radically different.

Raralevu in Fijian means the great plains; today these great plains are

the site of an extremely successful paddy scheme, which probably supplies rice to most of Fiji. For Indians, Raralevu is better known as the place of the dead, since it is the major crematory in that part of Fiji. The words cremation and cremated were so Hindu-specific that we had grown accustomed to interpreting them as if they were Hindi words. The English language, too, had made that connection explicit. The verb to cremate was first used in a written English text in 1874, with reference to the Hindu custom of *sati*. Its corresponding noun form, cremation, had been used over a century before by Dr Johnson with reference to that same act of self-immolation. Here, at Raralevu, friends of the family had already constructed a huge pyre under the extraordinarily precise supervision of my brother-in-law. Someone had donated the wood, another – an uncle, I think – had donated the coffin, someone else the enormous quantities of ghee used to keep the fire ablaze. This is how the system works. Things are simply done; everything locks itself into place, with no loose ends unattended.

The menfolk arrived at one in the afternoon. The priest had picked up a Western love for time and made sure that we weren't kept for long. By the pyre, he performed yet another ritual. Then, the body was taken out of the coffin and placed on the pyre. The final act remained to be done: the lighting. My brother and I had kept our emotions in check, but here, before igniting the wood, we gave way to grief. Within minutes the pyre was ablaze. The sight suddenly brought back an intensely 'private literary image that I had read in Edward Trelawny's account of the cremation of the poet Shelley on the shores of Viareggio. As the body burnt, Lord Byron had noticed, as I did now, how much brighter and purer the fire was when fuelled by the human body itself. And as the tongues of fire moved upwards, duplicating the literary image, in white, wavy flames that threatened to consume the blackened undersides of the corrugated-iron roof (I wonder if that too was Lysaghts), we moved around, speaking to the large crowd, many of whom I had not seen for years. Others, mere kids when I left in 1964, had now become householders. Changed beyond recognition, they dutifully pronounced their parents' names to introduce themselves. Others, friends of long standing, some forever marked by the political events of recent months, discussed happier days when my father's house was always open for a night's rest and a feed. As the *agni* (fire) raged and the body burned, we performed the *kapala-kriya* (the ritual of the breaking of the skull with a long pole) before moving away from Raralevu. The mourners went home, while some family members returned to eat their first morsel of food for the day. We had the customary shower before entering the house, then sat down to eat boiled rice and *urid dhal* off plantain leaves. That night I opened my father's wardrobe and read through his diary and my own letters to him, which he had preserved. Not one had been misplaced. They were

all there, collected in bundles and identified by their year: twenty-five years of correspondence, twenty-five years of prolonging, twenty-five years of getting to know one another. Alone in his room, sifting through the material, those to be kept aside, many more to be burnt the following morning, I clasped my head in my palms and cried.

*Take Three: Ashes to Water*

'*Hare rama hare rama hare rama hare hare*,' my great-grandfather used to intone from the shores of Laucala Bay whenever he went to visit my maternal grandfather. My great-grandfather – my father's grandfather from his mother's side – was Chandrika Maharaj, one of the very early indentured labourers, who probably came to Fiji in the early 1880s. My father's mother was Fiji-born, and spoke better Fijian than Hindi.

This old man – we used to call him 'old grandpa' – was fiercely individualistic. He would disappear for months on end. My maternal grandfather had befriended him and made him a *guru* (an Indian habit that had survived in Fiji well into the twentieth century). So each morning, he would go down to the sea and lift his cupped palms towards the sun, the *savitr*, the source of all energy. He carried in his hands his ubiquitous *lota* or brass jar, which I'm sure also functioned as a container of water for non-religious purposes. But as he intoned '*sitarama, hare rama*', small Fijian boys on their way to school would, in mocking parody, sing '*derewai, derepani, derewai ke sitarama*' ('wash your bum with water, wash your bum with water, raise your hands and say *sitarama*'). In bringing together the two functions of the brass jar – water for toilette and water for ablution towards *savitr* – these Fijian boys, like kids elsewhere, were deconstructing and transforming an age-old ritual transplanted upon the tranquil waters of the Pacific.

Here, too, alongside the mangrove swamps, my father would return every Christmas holidays to chop wood for our stove in Dilkusha. During the long, eight-week break from school, we would come to our grandfather's at Laucala Bay. My father would spend most of his eight weeks chopping *dogo* or mangrove, whose long aerial roots were excellent for firewood. As a little boy I would join him, and share with him a mango or two or a coconut. Sometimes he would narrate tragic moments associated with the family, such as the stormy night when my mother's cousin Gautam inadvertently gouged out the entrails of Bepo, the family's favourite stallion, on a ploughshare. The image of the wailing horse and the single shot from my grandfather's .45 rifle that killed him became part of a private trauma shared between my father and myself.

On one such occasion I arrived to find my father swaying in a hammock in my grandfather's horse stable. He was singing a song about being enticed by one of his friends, Bidesi, into drinking a bottle of rum:

Sharbat ke dhoke me  
'Honourable' ne rum pila diya  
Rum ka nasha dil pe carha  
Hum na jiyenge

Years later he would tell the story of how Bidesi, who lived alongside the stable, had called him in for a glass of lemon sherbet and instead given him a tumbler full of rum – overproof, colonial style – with only a dash of water on top. This he had drunk bottoms up, and immediately gone into a daze. I never saw my father drunk again – in fact, he had no stomach for alcohol at all – but that afternoon in the hammock, his drunken prose had a charm and geniality about it. He called me the cautious one, unlike my brother and my cousins, who had something of the family daredevil in them.

It seemed only proper that his last remains should be scattered over this stretch of the sea. On Sunday morning we went to the Raralevu crematory with the officiating priest. The body was reduced to ashes; even the bones had exploded to smithereens. The body ashes had to be divided from those of wood; this was done by pouring raw milk upon the ashes. Such is the magic of milk that it divides the two kinds of ashes, leaving only a bagful of body ashes. Alongside the still agitating pyre, the priest led us into an ancient ritual that involved the offering of balls of rice-flour to the *pitrīs* or deceased ancestors: *vayam imam pindam krtah*. That completed, the ashes and bones were collected along with a handful of flowers from the day before. We then got into two vans on our final journey towards Laucala Bay.

I hadn't been to Laucala Bay for years, and it seemed like a long journey. Apprehensive, I had expected signs of destitution and urban collapse in the wake of the Fijian coup. Instead, I found the country carefree and sleepy as usual. The potholes on the roads were still there, the bridges hadn't been painted and the divisions between the haves and the have-nots were just as marked. From the outside, Fiji looked no different from what it had been on my previous visit. Yet, given the nature of this journey, my mind observed different things, different signposts. I noticed Gulab Singh's store in Nasinu, where almost forty years before I had my first experience of riding a bicycle, which was lent to me by my second cousins. Further down towards Laqere bridge there were the remains of the old shop owned by Nanhu, one of my mother's cousins, with whom my father used to share an occasional bottle of beer and whose sexual escapades confounded our childhood imagination. These signposts would never have the same meaning for me, yet at the moments of final recognition they brought back intense memories, like the first taste of a tropical fruit, or Arrowroot biscuits, or a woman's body.

Before I knew it, the old RNZAF Flying Boat Base was in sight and Laucala Bay stretched ahead. The coconut palms had almost totally

disappeared, the road had been tarred, but the smell was the same and the mangroves had grown profusely, probably because no other mad wood-cutter had come in the years since my father left. We stopped almost directly opposite what used to be my grandfather's stables, rather nostalgically named Hastinapur, after the Kingdom of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. My brother and I, together with three of our cousins – Hitesh, Shandil and Baba – changed into our shorts and waded through the waters towards the breakers. The continental shelf in these parts slopes so gently that even at high tide you can walk for almost a mile before you begin to sense a sudden drop in the shelf. The morning was cold, and the water too, but as we walked we came to a field of seaweed, where the old warmth of tropical waters returned. Beyond the seaweed the sea opened up, shimmering in the sun as it does only in the tropics. Another hundred metres or so and we began to feel the sea bed sloping down. We paused. Facing towards the sun – *tat savitur varenyam iti asau va adityah savita*, 'that sun which we desire, indeed is Savitri' – we poured my father's last remains, together with the remains of camphor, *sindoor* (red lead) and flowers, into the vast ocean. The ashes dispersed in a trice, the bones sank, the flowers floated, the *sindoor* made a circle in red before being consumed by the enormous blue of the ocean. We turned towards the shore and, as if by the instinct acquired from years of living so close to the sea, we all dived into the alluring sea and swam towards the shore.

The priest, waiting by the rocks, smiled as if to indicate his approval. He lit a small fire, chanted a series of mantras appeasing the various rivers and gods of India: *om gangayai svaha, om prajapatyai svaha, om shantih shantih shantih*. On the way back, he narrated the story of Ahalya, seduced by Indra and transformed into a stone by her furious husband. Years later, Rama in his banishment chanced to stumble upon this stone, which immediately returned to life. There was a touching connection between this narrative and our own banishment in Fiji. A hundred years later, our prophets never came, or never understood the special plight of a race forever seeking the poignant permanence and certainty of home.

### *Tall Tales*

The Hindu mourning period lasts for thirteen days from the day of death itself. After the disposal of the ashes, life returns to normal. Most of the close relatives from further away return home, at least until the final feast at the end of the period of mourning. In the evenings, however, there is a constant stream of visitors and friends. The menfolk sit outside in the makeshift shed or pergola; the women go indoors and participate in readings from the *Bhagavad-gita*, the Hindu holy text. Each night the pattern is repeated. Indoors, the priest intones, improvises and explicates: *kim karman kim akarman*, 'what is action and what is inaction . . .?' My brother and my mother sit on the floor as

the primary recipients of this knowledge. They were to sleep on the floor, too, for the next thirteen nights, in an act of homage, penance and godly appeasement. Further back sit my aunts, cousins and nieces. My job is to keep the menfolk outside entertained for an hour or so while the recitations and commentaries on the religious text continue inside.

The menfolk who came each night knew exactly what to do. Almost miraculously a bowl of *yagona* would appear – one of my cousins, Baba as he was known to all and sundry, would be the invisible co-ordinator of this ritual – and for an hour or two there would be copious drinking of this soporific. Part of the ritual that the Indian in Fiji has transformed into an art form is the Fijian *talanoa* or small-talk around the *yagona* or *kava* bowl. As early as the 1930s, Prarap Chand Sharma and other Fiji Indian poets wrote extensively about *nagona ki kabani*, 'the story offaround kava'. And during these few hours each night, a seemingly endless series of tall tales was narrated. For someone who had been away for so long, the tales had an uncanny effect, haunting reminders of narratives that had only survived as fragments in my unconscious.

Arjun narrated his version of Bombay cinema as seen in the Empire Theatre, Nausori between 1948 and 1960; Narayan Swami filled in the tales about the Rewa soccer team's pursuit of magic and *jadoo* after its winning ways had come to an end; others, responding to gaps in the narrative, would break the uncomfortable silence by expanding on the life and times of such luminaries as Chappanchuri, Shaitani, Magalesi, Charanna, Nanki and, above all, the alluring Ulfat, courtesan *par excellence* and initiator of many a Nausori kid into the ways of the world. Further away, from across the river, came the harmonious singing of a Fijian choir – very much a part of post-coup fundamentalist Christian revivalism: 'I love my Jesus, I love you sweet Jesus'.

But there was one narrative – narrated on Monday night – that must be given a special place, because it was a narrative resonating with such intense political significance. This was Jeffery's tale.

### *Jeffery's Tale*

There is a branch of my family that is given to eccentricity. My paternal grandfather was a Brahmin priest who had memorised all the Hindu sacred texts, spoke in his sleep (some say in a variety of languages) and was given to bouts of hallucination; one of my uncles on my mother's side had been into witchcraft and sorcery – *indrajai* as we used to call it – and another, somewhat more remote, was occasionally in the habit of counting motor-cars. Jeffery belonged to that general class of my family. With a university education, Jeffery had put his considerable skills as a political analyst into the writing of a magnum opus about unsung revolutionary movements around the world – the Naxalites, the Tibetan supporters of the Dalai Lama, the Baluchi



uprising, the Tamil Tigers, the Indian Aboriginal revolt in Madhya Pradesh and of course, close to home, the simmerings of rebellion in the Pacific.

After ten years of extensive research, Jeffery was nowhere near completing his work. His filing system was chaotic and his conception of time out of joint. As if on an impulse, he would walk the distance from Nausori to the larger libraries in Suva. Taking the Sawani road was no mean feat – a return trip would itself take some eight or nine hours. Often he would reach the Suva archives too late, and end up spending his whole day travelling.

When I met him nine years before, after his return from University, he had spoken about a boat trip he had been meaning to take. 'Can you put me on a boat?' he had beseeched – 'a small one, no larger than a dinghy – and just let me adrift. I would very much like that.' When his mind was clear, he would speak in a discourse so self-assured and confident that it was hard to disagree with him. At other times he would be on one of his walks, incognito, not speaking, not spoken to. The tale that Jeffery narrated on Monday night, his first show of respect towards his dead uncle, must be given in the first person – though, alas, not in his own words.

Of course you must have heard about the coup, and about the furore surrounding the shipment of arms to help in an insurrection. An insurrection, my bloody foot, what insurrection! This was no more than a cover-up, a method of finding slightly better rifles and machine guns for the army. And the army got caught in Sydney, so what do you do? Blame it on the Indians, build up a bit of frenzy, beat up a few Indians and consolidate power.

Well, as luck would have it, I got into the very thick of things, not because I had written anything, or spoken to anyone (I was never asked) but because of a fluke of history. It was about this time last year that the military targeted the Nausori-Baulevu area as a possible centre of arms infiltration. Where they got this idea from is quite beyond me, but they chose a few suspicious characters – politicians and the like – and began to ransack their houses. One of these houses was Baba's, since his father had been accused of political support for the coalition, which was probably not true in the way in which the military interpreted the meaning of the word 'support'.

Well, I was there at Baba's shop one evening, giving him a hand at the liquor counter downstairs, when two truckloads of soldiers suddenly rushed into the shop from King's Road. In full combat uniform, some with balaclavas, they took up positions all around the house and screamed 'Freeze!'. They were already in that position, arms raised, rifles aimed, feet bent, legs slightly apart, the right foot fractionally forward. The head of this unit moved swiftly towards Baba and said that they were going to search the house. No-one must move, the

customers must stay in the shop, everyone where you are. And so began a systematic examination of the house. I sat at the bottom of the stairs, watching the chief sergeant or corporal (I wouldn't know the difference) walking up and down while about two dozen soldiers (apart from those still 'frozen' outside) carefully went through the wooden cases of tinned fruit and vegetables that had arrived some weeks before.

They had an especially Fijian sense of orderly examination, and I couldn't help but admire their dexterity. Everything put back in exactly the right place, from the statue of Krishna playing his flute to a file of invoices. Nothing seemed to have escaped them, and all along the unit chief kept walking up and down the stairs. There must be something here, he seemed to be thinking, some incriminating evidence; this place is far too clean. Like the detective in Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, he felt that excessive orderliness was always suspicious. Two hours later, the staircase already creaking with the constant running of feet, the unit chief paused at the bottom of the staircase, looked me in the eye and said, 'You, stand up'. Unknown to me, I had been sitting on a wooden case, three feet by two by one and a half. He lifted this wooden case with his muscular hands and examined it. The markings had faded, but they could still be read. 'Royal New Zealand Air Force', it said, with a code number alongside and barely decipherable mention of the name of a Pacific Battalion. He prised it open and began to go through the chisels and spanners, screwdrivers, nuts and bolts, bottles, beakers, test-tubes, syringes and much else besides that my uncle had accumulated over the years. But also, in amongst all this, was a 1940s pistol, probably no longer in working order, which my uncle had discovered in a dump that he frequented. That was it. Mission completed, the chief of the unit carried the case and its contents to the waiting truck, asked us to see if nothing else was missing (we wouldn't want to be accused of stealing, would we?), and disappeared.

The next morning a news item appeared in the *Fiji Times*: 'Military raids in the Nausori area led to the discovery of a significant amount of arms and ammunition. Cases with obscure military markings were found, as well as evidence of equipment meant for pyrotechnical gadgets. The military has decided to concentrate its efforts in this area. Charges will be laid later.'

The reference to 'pyrotechnical gadgets' worried cousin Jeffery enormously. This word was outside the range of his considerable vocabulary, and rather shamefacedly he had to walk to the Suva Municipal Library (again some fourteen miles away) to consult the *OED*. Beakers, test-tubes, syringes, fireworks – yes, it finally made sense to him, not by its self-evident logic but by the laws of military deduction.

There was a peripheral narrative embedded in all this. My mother's younger brother, Dhurup, used to work at the Royal New Zealand Air

Force Base at Laucala Bay in the late '40s and early '50s. The case in question, I now recalled, became a feature of all his eight sisters' households. My mother had a similar wooden case which opened outwards, with the top 'flap' never really falling back because it was attached to the case proper with two sets of rope. As children we used to play hide-and-seek in it, never questioning how on earth we ever came by it. The Royal New Zealand Air Force auditors might have turned a blind eye to these empty cases, or felt relieved that at least someone valued them. Our case was gnawed through and through by Zimbo I, our part-Alsatian, who possessed an almost defiant urge to chew. He probably recognised its historical importance.

### *The Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages*

I had to fly to Fiji through Auckland. The start of school holidays in Eastern Australia meant that direct flights to Nadi were totally full. In spite of the delay of some six hours, this was a blessing in disguise. Twenty-five years before, I had taken a small TEAL Electra flight out of Nadi; this afternoon I was going back from Auckland to Nadi on an Air Pacific plane which was about the same size as the Electra, and equally slow, or so it seemed. In a peculiar confirmation of a cyclical pattern, this flight tied beginnings with ends, the first and the last, bringing together memories of the chicken curry and *roti* hastily eaten over a waste-paper basket in Auckland by an 18-year-old Fijian Indian boy with a cheque for £125 in his inner jacket pocket – the first third of the year's scholarship allowance.

On the plane to Nadi I met another Fijian Indian, also returning, but for different reasons. Unannounced, he explained that the Indian race in Fiji was the *most chutia jat* ('the most abominable of races') – *aisan chutia jat duniya me kabin nabin hai* ('such a bastard of a race can't be found anywhere else in the world'). Against this *chutia jat* were the native Fijians, honest, straightforward, forgiving, fair-minded and, above all, not prone to duplicity. At Lelean, my predominantly Fijian Methodist High School, the Fijian teachers used to warn Fijian kids not to follow the ways of the Indians who were *tawa dodonu* (dishonest) and without *i tovo* (custom). These were probably stereotypical expressions, but social intercourse has a way of depicting the stereotypical as the real. The definition of the Fijians as a race without the seven deadly sins actually came to me from my father, who grew up with them in Tokatoka, Rewa. On his death, however, no Fijian came to pay his last respects.

The bureaucracy, even in Fiji, makes no distinction between birth, death and marriage. Directly behind the statues of Ratu Sukuna and Ratu Cakobau, on the ground floor of the old Government Buildings, is the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. I had been there twice before to get a birth certificate for my passport. This time I made the

journey to get my father's death certificate. With the usual delays, all of Monday morning was spent in commuting between Suva and Nausori, but my brother and I finally got the papers in order, paid the customary \$5 and entered the small, suffocating area which was the Registry. Here, for the first time since my return on Friday night, the new shape of Fiji hit me.

The Registry was now divided between Fijians and Indians along strict apartheid principles. The Fijians gathered at the counter on the left, the Indians on the right. The Fijians would be spoken to first and details of their requests taken. At the counter only Fijian clerks could be seen. Almost all these clerks made no secret of their total disdain of the larger group of Indians patiently waiting at the Indian counter.

I stood in that group all afternoon. No-one came; no-one asked; the number of Indians simply swelled to about fifty while the Fijian counter was progressively cleared. At around three in the afternoon, when there was no Fijian to be served, the clerks turned towards us and in the vaguest of terms asked what we wanted. In the resultant chaos of requests, no one could get his or her message across. I had another day left in Fiji, and I had to complete a few urgent legal matters before returning. Nothing could be done without a death certificate. I had no choice now but to make a nuisance of myself and so, for the first time in three days, I spoke in English, in the hope that this colonial language might have its effect.

It probably sounded different, or maybe there was a strange sense of recognition in the eyes of the Fijian clerk who came forward. Whatever the reason, the clerk had given too much away and needed to be assertive: *A cava kai Idia?* – 'What, you Indian?' I hadn't been addressed as an Indian in years, not since the day when a colonial school inspector had referred to me as 'You, little Indian boy' to distinguish me from the much larger Fijian boys at school. It sounded rather strange – the elliptical 'What, you Indian?' It hurt in a way that it never did with the colonial school inspector. It hurt because it came from the Fijian. Hey now, wait a minute, this is all wrong; we are the *chutia* race, not you! And I've come in humility, I've come to get a piece of paper proclaiming my father's death. There can't be any point-scoring now, surely not in death. But someone had spoken, and I was asked to come the following day.

I arrived dutifully on Tuesday morning with a slip of paper – there was a time when everyone would be given a numbered slip and your number would be progressively called – and I stayed yet again in the ever-growing Indian enclave while the Fijian counter was being dutifully served. The men and women at the counter never looked at us, never acknowledged our presence, and when the Fijian counter was empty spoke not to us but at us. Suddenly, it struck me that the Indian was now the enemy, and the ideologues of the military regime had a simple directive. Make life miserable for them where it hurts most –

this Registry, the Ministry of Lands, the Passport Office, the Fijian Affairs Board and, finally, the Education Ministry. Hit them, demoralise them. Make them feel like an untouchable race; after all they came as *coolies* – a favourite word for the Indian in a recent book on Rabuka (*No Other Way*).

I got my father's death certificate after three on Tuesday afternoon. This gave me barely an hour and a half in which to see his lawyers and confirm my return ticket to Sydney. On my way out, I glanced sideways at a little office with a sign proclaiming that it was the 'Ministry of Indian Affairs'. The ironic 'Indianness' of this Ministry was underlined by posters from the Life Insurance Corporation of India and the Bank of Baroda, printed on poorly recycled Indian paper and pasted onto the walls with blu-tack. Outside, a large black Mercedes with a Government of Fiji number plate symbolised the perks that went with the job. Whoever had accepted responsibility for that Ministry – an Indian most certainly – wasn't aware of the way in which this Ministry in itself was part of the policy of division, hate and apartheid.

The Indian on the plane out of Auckland had called us a bastard of a race against the nobility of the Fijian. The death of my father – a man shaken by the coup and the racial hatred that ensued – brought me face to face with a remarkable reversal. The Fiji Indian had acquired the virtues of camaraderie and humility, of patience and forgiveness, of brotherhood and tolerance; the Fijian, like a tragic hero, had fallen from his erstwhile nobility. That was the saddest thing about my father's death; in death I lost not only a father but also the only piece of earth which I could call my own, the place to which I finally belonged – if it is ever possible for sons of indentured labourers to belong. There is a special pathos about a race without a home, a pathos that is not generally understood. It leads to a problematic sense of belonging to one's adopted nation, an equivocal yearning for the original nation – the land of Rama in this instance – from which we came. The following morning as I sat in seat 41C of Qantas flight QF18 to Sydney, and looked out towards the cane fields, unchanged since the TEAL Electra flight of 1964, I was moved by an immense surge of emotion to find in fact that, sitting in the Qantas plane, listening to the language in which my children spoke, I was actually going home.

## NOTES

*Ni sa moce*: Fijian for goodbye

*Salaam*: Indian greeting, the Muslim equivalent of *namaste*

Zimbo: Tarzan-like character in Homi Wadia's 1957 extravaganza of that name

TEAL: Tasman Empire Airways Limited, now Air New Zealand

Lysaght: Extremely durable brand of roofing iron distributed by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company

*Sharbat ke dhoke me . . . :*

The offer of sherbet was a gentle trick  
'Honourable' poured me rum instead;  
As this rum shoots through my heart,  
'O I will not live', I sing.

Chappanchuri, Shaitani, etc.: Names of real or apocryphal women of pleasure  
*derewai*: Fijian for 'washing (one's bum) with water'. *Derepani* combines the  
Fijian *dere* (to wash) with the Hindi *pani* (water)

*chutia*: From the Hindi word *chutar*, arse, hence arsehole

*No Other Way*: Rabuka's own story as told to Eddie Dean and Stan Ritova  
(Doubleday, Sydney, 1988).